Job Descriptions Are Old Hat

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My experience of job descriptions is that they are brought out to explain the job to some new employee, or dragged out for a job evaluation exercise, but otherwise they sit neglected and forgotten in a drawer somewhere. That's because they are inert, passive documents, often used once and then discarded. They may show who the job-holder's boss is, what department they are in, who their contacts are, describe their activities, but they do nothing to energise the business.

The trouble with job descriptions is that they only describe activities. Most are full of "-ings" : plann-ing, organiz-ing, communicat-ing, decid-ing, motivat-ing, etc. etc. What we need to describe are the outputs required of the job-holders, so that they know what to focus on, what to spend their time on, how to get the right things done. A powerful new trend today is to describe jobs not as a series of activities, but in terms of the Personal Contributions (PCs) each job-holder can make to the performance of their company.

The first rule when defining the PCs of any job is:

- **They should represent the outputs of the job, the results to be achieved rather than the activities used to achieve them**

Take a sales representative job as an example. In describing their job, a salesperson might say : "I research my territory; I make phone calls to make appointments; I travel to meet potential clients; I make presentations", etc. But these are all activities, they only add cost. The only thing that adds value to the business is 'actual sales', and that should be the first output of virtually every salesperson job. One of the key tasks then is actually to *minimise* the number of activities it takes to achieve real sales, the key reason the individual is employed. That is what makes the salesperson truly productive.

Take another example : a maintenance engineer. Asked to describe his job, he might say : "I work with tools; I attend to breakdowns; I keep spare parts; I carry out regular oiling and greasing services", etc. And while all these may be needed, again they are all activities, they only add cost. The true output we are looking for, and what the engineer should focus on is : 'Fully Operational Equipment'. We should then help the engineer minimise the effort and cost involved in delivering that result.

When maintenance engineers have their jobs defined as a series of outputs rather than a list of activities, they not only begin to see their job differently, they start *doing* it differently. Often they stop calling their job 'Breakdown Maintenance' (we only work when machines break down) and rename it 'Running Maintenance' (our job is to *avoid* breakdowns and keep things running). They soon realize that showing machine operators how to avoid the most common breakdowns makes the job easier for both parties. That stimulates *co-operation* between engineering and production rather than conflict (never an easy thing to do!).

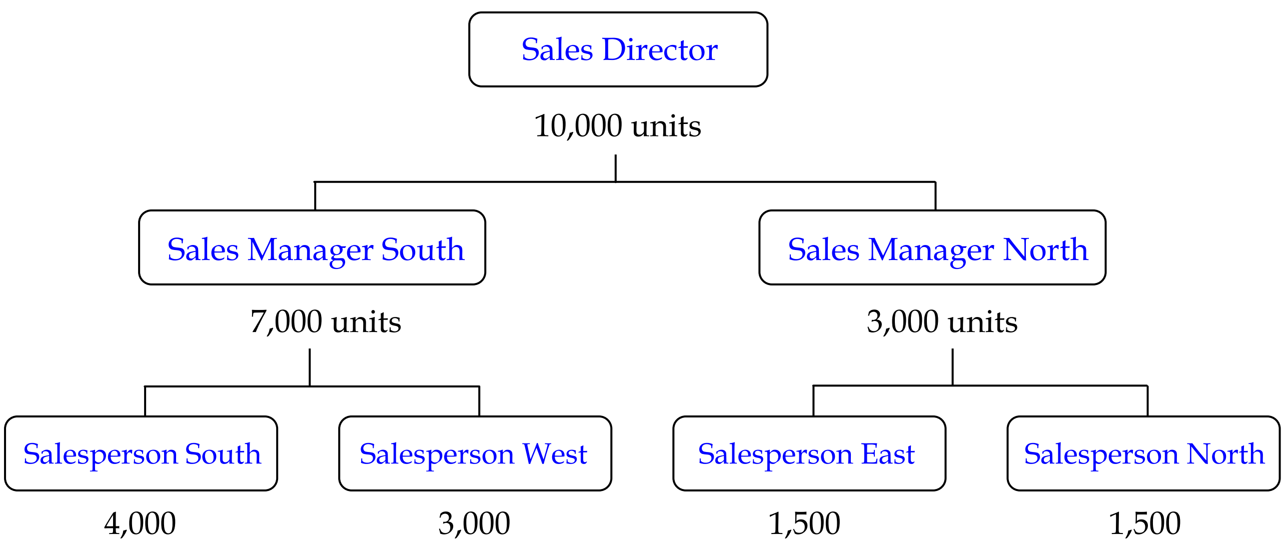
And that is one of the great benefits of describing jobs in terms of Personal Contributions. People begin to understand that they are not only doing a job, but that that job needs to be making a positive contribution to the profitability and effectiveness of the organization as a whole. PCs, by focussing on the outputs of the job, also make it clear just 'who does what', so that (like the engineers and production operators above) staff in different departments can integrate their activities and work like a team to get a better job done.

The second rule about Personal Contributions is :

- **They should be unique to the job-holder**

Fuzzy responsibilities can cause wasteful overlap and duplication in many companies. That adds cost but no extra value. PCs start from the premise that where two people are responsible for the same thing, one is not required. Indeed, where three people are responsible for the same thing (and it often happens), two are not required. PCs make clear what each individual is *uniquely* responsible for, and how their work interlocks with those of their colleagues. Similarly, jobs at every level have to add some new value, not simply supervise the jobs of others.

Let's take an example. It is not uncommon for sales organizations to decide on overall company sales targets, and to allocate subdivisions of this to the various regions or departments involved, who in turn allocate targets to the front-line salesforce. In simplistic terms, this might lead to an organization chart like the one below :



PCs say there is only one group of persons responsible for making sales, namely the salespersons who come face-to-face with the customer. That is their unique responsibility. It is not enough then for managers to claim their job is simply to encourage, push, pressurise and otherwise 'motivate' their salesforce to meet their targets. If the salesforce are already meeting their targets, then we don't actually need any of the managers above . . . unless they *add new value*. So what is that new value?

Let's rewrite the jobs in terms of their Personal Contributions. For salespeople, we might decide on **Sales Levels** (actual versus target), **Order Size** (to prevent too many overly small orders), and **New Accounts** (to broaden the customer base) as three of their key PCs.

What contribution could Sales Managers then *uniquely* add? Here we could nominate **Sales Tactics** (developing strategies for maximising sales), **Sales Training** (organising for salespeople to get the training they need), and **Sales Administration** (minimising the amount of admin. salespeople have to use to get the job done). In other words, Sales Managers become the 'servants of their people' rather than their supervisors. Supervising the work of a subordinate is an activity, not an output.

At Director level, we would attribute PCs where they have unique authority to act. For example, **Company Sales Strategy** (deciding for example which sections of industry the company should focus on), **Sales Prices** (decisions which help the company maintain margins yet stay competitive), **Market Research** (such as working on ideas for new products, etc.).

The organization chart might then look more like this :

Sales Director
Sales strategy
Sales Prices
Market research

Sales Manager South
Sales tactics
Sales training
Sales Administration

Sales Manager North
Sales tactics
Sales training
Sales Administration

Salesperson South
Sales levels
Order size
New accounts

Salesperson West
Sales levels
Order size
New accounts

Salesperson East
Sales levels
Order size
New accounts

Salesperson North
Sales levels
Order size
New accounts

The list at each level is likely to be longer in a real situation, of course, but the layout illustrates the key points. Every PC is unique to the person at that level, there is no repetition or duplication. But the PCs are specifically designed to work together to form a coherent whole, where everyone knows clearly what the other's role is, and each can support the other in maximising the performance of the organization as a whole.

Fuzzy or overlapping responsibilities can often be annoying and confusing, but in some cases they can be downright dangerous. This came home sadly to one company when a contractor was electrocuted on the job, and managers started blaming each other for the failure. The Maintenance supervisor had not controlled the job, some said; the Maintenance supervisor said the blame lay with the electrician who last worked on the equipment; surely the Production Director must be accountable for everything that happens in his area, said others; the Safety Officer did not ensure the situation was safe, said the Production Director. When tempers had cooled, it became obvious the responsibilities on safety had to be made much clearer for the future.

Managers in every area had to take on personal responsibility for providing equipment which was safe for staff to operate, they concluded, but equally staff members had to adopt safe working habits to make the system work effectively. The Production Director had both the responsibility and the right level of budget authority to provide a safe working environment. Equally, he had to ensure the work arrangements met laid-down legal requirements, even though he would take advice on that subject from the Safety Officer, whose personal responsibility it was to keep fully up-to-date with current legislation.

The interlocking responsibilities then began to look like this :

Director

Legal Safety Procedures
Safe Working Environment

Safety Officer

Safety Legislation Advice
Safety Training Services
Accident Records

Manager

Safe Working Equipment
Safe Working Methods
Subordinates' Safety Knowledge

Employee

Safe Working Habits
Hazard Spotting

If there is any issue on which companies need to clarify exactly 'who does what', it is on the matter of safety. This company has not had a serious accident in 25 years.

Rule Three :

- **PCs must be within the control or authority of the job-holder.**

This may seem obvious, but job-holders are often given responsibilities where they are *not* in control of the results, or where they have no authority to act. Let's take the example of a typical front-line production situation to illustrate the point. When we ask front-line managers to describe their own versus their operators' responsibilities, we will regularly get some or all of the following :

PCs of the Manager

- Output / productivity
- Quality
- Costs
- Admin. / records
- Good housekeeping
- Scrap / rework
- Safety
- Employee relations
- Training

PCs of the Operator

- Attendance
- Good timekeeping
- Meeting performance targets
- Flexibility

Managers generally feel that *they* are primarily responsible for the output and quality coming out of their sections, and simply expect their people to turn up on time each day, to apply themselves to the job, and be reasonably flexible in getting the work done.

But then we pose a key question : "Where do the faults first occur?". For example, who actually has their hands on the product all day, the manager or the operator? Providing the operator has all they need to turn out a quality job, who is really in charge of producing a quality product, or meeting reasonable productivity targets? Everyone concludes it has to be the operator. The fact is, we need to *allocate responsibility where the control lies*. Responsibilities make no sense otherwise.

Then we pose a second question : "How many of the items currently on the Manager's list should we properly transfer to the Operator?" And what responsibilities do we give to the Manager to ensure they *add new value*? It is not uncommon then to get a list like the one below.

PCs of the Manager

- Productivity
- Process improvement
- Costs
- Admin. / records
- Safe working arrangements
- Team development
- Housekeeping standards
- Work scheduling

PCs of the Operator

- Output
- Product quality
- Scrap / rework
- Data collection
- Safe working habits
- Skills
- Good housekeeping

In this scenario, operators are expected to assume full responsibility *of what they are already in control of anyway*, and what they are fully capable of doing. That is what they are paid for, that is their personal contribution to the performance of the organization which affords them their living. And that clarity means the Manager can devote much more of his or her time to one of their main functions, namely searching out opportunities for continuous improvement.

For example, the manager may feel that some re-arrangement of the work area, or the sequence of the processes, could well increase productivity. That's why we allocate 'output' on the existing equipment to the operator, but 'productivity' to the manager who has the authority to make such changes. The same applies to most of the other items on the list : the manager's separate functions fit like a jigsaw with the functions of the people he manages to create a seamless and productive whole.

That is one of the key benefits of redefining jobs in terms of their unique contributions to the business. *With exactly the same resources of people and equipment, and at no additional cost to the business*, productivity and co-operation in the organization takes a major leap forward.

Rule Four :

- **PCs must be directed to serving the job-holder's customers.**

There is a strong tendency for those within a company to believe that their 'customers' are all outside the organization. Some who never meet 'customers' think they don't have customers. Not so. Every job-holder has customers. In fact, if you don't have customers, you don't have a job. For every job-holder, your customers are *whoever gets the results of your work*.

If you are a craftsman directly preparing a product for a buyer, or you daily provide a service face-to-face, then your customer is clear. But in many more instances, servicing the ultimate customer requires a sequence of processes to get the complete job done. In that case, your customer is *the next person in the line*. The critical requirement for every job-holder is to deliver whatever is the required item, on time, to allow their customer in turn to do a zero-defect job. After all, only if all the steps in the process are done well can any company hope to deliver to the ultimate customer the fault-free product or service they were first promised.

Our experience is that once job-holders identify all their customers, whether inside or outside the business, they start doing the job differently. That change of thinking is inevitably reinforced when they actually visit their customers and speak to them face-to-face. In the insurance company, they might hear things like : "I know you send me all this information, but sometimes I get held up because I can't read your writing", or "by not opening the post first thing in the morning, we can often lose a whole day by not having the information we need". In the manufacturing business, it might be : "I know you deliver these parts to me, but by piling them on top of each other like we do, quite a few of the parts get damaged before I get the chance to use them", or "when these heavy parts fill a whole crate, it gets too heavy to lift – can we use a smaller crate, or put in fewer of these heavy items?"

Interaction between doers and their customers within companies is something we strongly encourage. First, it breaks down barriers between departments, and staff begin to realize the need to work better together if they're going to get their whole process right for the customer who ultimately pays all their salaries. Also, when staff meet together to talk about the job, they realize that aspects of the job which may have been irritations for years are often very easily cured. Finally, when you know the person who gets the result of your work *personally*, you pay more attention to the job - much like doing the job for some unknown customer and doing the same job for a member of your family.

Job-holders often find that they have never been asked to identify their customers before, or to talk to them about the service they get. One example was the R & D Division of the Bank of England Printing Works where they had been printing English banknotes for many years. They felt they didn't have customers, or if they did there was only one, namely the Chief Cashier, whose signature appears on all notes and who habitually ordered more than a billion notes every year.

But when the department considered who 'got the results of their work' they realized that all the retail banks in the country were their customers; as were their own manufacturing division (to make the notes easy to print securely and cost-effectively); as were the police (making notes hard to forge); as were all those who handled notes every day e.g. foreign exchange offices, betting shops, blind folks, High Street grocers and retailers, etc. etc. Astonishingly, they had never been to talk directly to any of these; they had done all of their work till then from inside their department.

The insight and revelations brought about a whole revolution in their thinking. First, they renamed their department Banknote Development Division, to keep them focused on their prime purpose. 'Manufacturability' became one of the key success measures of their work. They redefined every job. They abandoned their former hierarchical organization structure in favour of a project-based structure, where people became members of different project teams irrespective of their seniority. Delivering recognizable value for real customers became their *raison d'être*.

Many job-holders think they already know what constitutes a 'quality job' in their own case. When they start visiting the people who get the results of their work - their customers - they soon realize that 'quality' is not what they say it is, it is what the customer says it is. Describing jobs in terms of Personal Contributions make job-holders much more customer-focused.

Rule Five :

- **Well written PCs allow job-holders to know when they are succeeding.**

Many people have to wait until their personal appraisal with their boss to find out how they are doing. Often they are afraid they will hear things they don't want to hear. Similarly, bosses often defer appraisal meetings where they may have to communicate unwelcome news. Not with PCs. One of the key features of PCs is to attach 'success measures' which will *allow the job-holder to know - without having to ask their boss - when they are succeeding*. The intent is to create much more of a 'no surprises' environment.

Let's take some examples from real people doing real jobs by way of illustration. Most job-holders will normally have a list of seven to ten PCs, but here we have taken just one PC from several jobs to show some sample bullet-point 'success measures'.

Management Accountant

Company Accounts

- Accounts on Directors' desks, complete and error-free, two days before each Board meeting
- Directors commend the accounts for their simplicity of layout and understandability

Production Manager

Productivity

- Productivity = defect-free product output versus total hours worked
- Minimum annual improvement 3%

Catering Manager

Site Catering Service

- Percentage usage by site employees
- Subsidy kept within agreed budget

Secretary

Document Management

- Any specified document retrievable within two minutes of request
- All withdrawn documents back in files by end of business each day

When managers or staff are first asked to define the outputs of their jobs and how they should measure their success, they often come up with some interesting ideas. In one company, salespeople themselves decided what would be regarded as *minimum, good,* and *outstanding* performance on a number of PCs, such as Monthly Sales Value, Sales Profitability, New Accounts, etc. They then agreed what figures should apply in each category, so that every salesperson would be able to judge their own performance against these three standards every month by themselves. The idea rather appealed to their managers, who then felt the urge to adopt much more a role of helper and trainer rather than pressuriser.

In another organization, a group of secretaries tackled the task of defining their PCs in a series of meetings over several months. In the process, they described what a *good, better, and best* secretary would do for their boss on subjects like Diary Management, Making Travel Arrangements, Taking Minutes, etc. Interestingly, once they had defined what they regarded as '*best*', the secretaries couldn't help doing what they had just described. The fact is, the overwhelming majority of people prefer to do the best job they can, and when we make it clear precisely what that is, that is what people will do.

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In getting to the true value-adding outputs of any job, there are a number of pertinent questions that ought to be asked.

- What is the most useful contribution I can make to the performance of this business?
- What is it the Company is actually paying me for?
- What should I spend my time on to achieve the best results?
- How will I know when the job is being done well?
- How can I best satisfy the customers who get the results of my work?

There is a tendency to believe that when one is terribly busy, one obviously must be doing a good job for the organization. But no, busy-ness is not the same as effectiveness. For any job, 'effectiveness is delivering on the outputs required of the position'. One salesperson might be frantically energetic and hard-working, but still struggle to make sales. Another may be much less active, but keeps bringing home the orders. The trouble with job descriptions is that they just describe what people do, not what they need to achieve. That is why more and more organizations are using the concept of Personal Contributions to define their jobs. They realize that in today's challenging and competitive world, performance is all that counts.

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